

face, and I was backed into a corner with deciding how I wanted to proceed with my military career.”

How many servicemembers had this fear? How many brave soldiers served honorably but with a secret, a secret that they knew could end their career in the military, their career of service to our Nation?

And Stephanie had two secrets: her sexuality, a secret she kept to protect her military career, and a secret regarding the sexual assault she suffered while in the Army. You see, reporting it could also mean revealing the secret of her sexuality.

Stephanie couldn't seek justice as a victim because seeking justice would mean she could potentially bring an end to her career. She could potentially be identified as gay in the military.

Stephanie was faced with this horrible choice, this horrible reality, and all the while, her intention had been to bravely serve our Nation, as so many brave LGBTQ Americans have.

I am proud to share this story because Stephanie reflects on the fact that had Don't Ask, Don't Tell not been in place, perhaps a bit of her story would have gone differently. She says that she never regretted her decision to join the Army, but she still lives with the regret of not allowing herself to live her truth.

Stephanie's story is emblematic of the struggles, the hardships, and, most importantly, the triumphs of so many who have served in our Air Force before the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

During that time, members of our military showed tremendous courage, selflessness. They served our country with the utmost honor and valor, and they put their service to country above even living their own truth. But our military is stronger because of the repeal.

Our military has always been strong because of brave servicemembers, brave soldiers like Stephanie, and our Nation is better because it has been protected by people like Stephanie and so many of the stories we have heard today. Our Nation is better protected because of the protections afforded to those who put on the uniform.

Tonight, we have the opportunity to reflect on the importance of this decision on the 10th anniversary of the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. For thousands of servicemembers and veterans like Stephanie, this decision was long overdue.

May we always look to defend and support those who are willing to serve our country, sacrifice on behalf of our fellow Americans, and build a stronger Nation. I am grateful to every LGBTQ servicemember who has served, past or present. I thank them for their sacrifice to our country, and I am so grateful that as they serve today, they can do it celebrating their full selves.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Virginia

for sharing the very moving story of Stephanie Merlo, for expressing her humanity on the floor today. The Representative exemplifies, to me, the best of my Caucus, the Democratic Caucus, and the values we stand up for, which is to include more people in “we the people.”

Madam Speaker, this concludes our Special Order hour. I thank my colleagues for their participation and each of the veterans who shared their stories and, in particular, every veteran and servicemember who gave their service to our country in the face of overwhelming prejudice.

We recognize today as the 10th anniversary of an important first step toward making the Armed Forces more inclusive and accepting, a commitment that I and all my colleagues here today will continue to carry forward.

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. NORTON. Madam Speaker, I rise today to include in the RECORD a statement of a constituent of mine, Staff Sergeant Ashley Carothers, who is a veteran of the United States Air Force. Staff Sergeant Carothers served from 2005 to 2013, and thus was subject to the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy for most of her service. I share her story as we commemorate 10 years since the repeal of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” Staff Sergeant Carothers was honorably discharged in 2013 and lives in the District of Columbia.

This is what she has said about her experience:

During my Air Force career, I lived a double life. I was an actress portraying a straight Airman on a stage called life and behind closed doors a very broken human being that desperately just wanted to be herself. I was a lesbian in hiding. I was the Airman that did it all, scored as high as they could on tests, worked to know the job better than the rest and volunteer for everything that I could in hopes that my busy life would never uncover the truth. Behind the curtain I dated but relationships couldn't really completely build because there was always a sense of getting caught especially in a mil to mil relationship. Supervisors constantly questioning you and trying to set you up with the new guy in the shop and always prying into why you constantly denied any male advances. The worst part was the feeling of always being alone while fending off the wolves (male airmen) and dodging sexual harassment and assault as a woman just trying to serve her country. I guess it made me stronger in a weird messed up way as I was able to provide support to others later in my career, support I never had.

While serving in Germany I had the privilege to be one of the chapter leaders for the then-underground organization known as OutServe. Prior to the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell we had a large number of LGBTQ service members all over the European theater that relied on each other for support and a sense of community. During this timeframe, multiple individuals struggled further with their military leadership as those opposed to the repeal expressed their views verbally, leaving many with anxiety about the future. There were many late-night phone calls trying to be the voice of reason in moments of doubt and desperation when options to turn to mental health professionals were nonexistent for fear of discharge. Not being able to fight for them and speak freely and openly to commands for support damaged in-

dividuals beyond repair. If anyone went to speak to a mental health professional and disclosed the fact that they identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, they would be on the chopping block as they were serving under Don't Ask, Don't Tell. On top of that, many served in career fields that they had to report any visit to a mental health professional, further limiting these individuals who desperately needed assistance. These individuals had no one to turn to and suffered in silence. Most even after the repeal couldn't come out as lesbian, gay or bisexual for fear of mistreatment from their superiors. Some suffered greatly by coming out to their commands, as they had to work twice as hard to prove themselves and were often overlooked for promotion and awards.

Balancing my own life struggles and the struggles of those that looked to me for support was a pretty demanding time in my career. My career and health did suffer, but I often think about what life would have been like if I hadn't been able to give so much or if the military would have just let humans be humans by being their true authentic selves in the first place. The constant jokes, ridicule and mistreatment from superiors hasn't gone away. On this anniversary, I hope that those in charge will finally take the right steps and change the culture.

Madam Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to share Staff Sergeant Carothers' story and to remember the thousands like her who were harmed by Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

ADJOURNMENT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to section 11(b) of House Resolution 188, the House stands adjourned until 9 a.m. tomorrow for morning-hour debate and 11 a.m. for legislative business.

Thereupon (at 8 o'clock and 44 minutes p.m.), under its previous order, the House adjourned until tomorrow, Tuesday, September 21, 2021, at 9 a.m. for morning-hour debate.

BUDGETARY EFFECTS OF PAYGO LEGISLATION

Pursuant to the Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act of 2010 (PAYGO), Mr. YARMUTH hereby submits, prior to the vote on passage, for printing in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, that H.R. 5293, the Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act of 2021, as amended, would have no significant effect on the deficit, and therefore, the budgetary effects of such bill are estimated as zero.

EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATIONS, ETC.

Under clause 2 of rule XIV, executive communications were taken from the Speaker's table and referred as follows:

EC-2163. A letter from the Deputy Chief, Auctions Division, Office of Economics and Analytics, Federal Communication Commission, transmitting the Commission's final rule — Auction of Flexible-use Service Licenses in the 3.45-3.55 GHz Band for Next-generation wireless services; Notice and Filing Requirements, Minimum Opening, Bids, Upfront Payments, and Other Procedures for Auction 110; Bidding in Auction 110 Scheduled to Begin October 5, 2021 [AU Docket No.: